Journal of Philosophy of Education
The Journal of Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain
pesgb

Journal of Philosophy of Education, Vol. 54, No. 3, 2020

Unsettling Knowledge: Irony and Education

RICHARD SMITH

Philosophy is sometimes thought of as having two principal dimensions: one that aims to build systems and doctrines, and another that is concerned to unsettle fixed ways of thinking. Richard Peters seems to position himself in both camps. I suggest that education in the UK today increasingly bears the marks of rigid thinking, largely as a result of the domination of neoliberal fundamentalism, and is in particular need of unsettling. This, I argue, was a major part of western philosophy's mission at what we think of as its birth in the work of Socrates and Plato's dialogues. In these texts too we see depicted the arrogance and complacency of characters who may sometimes remind us of our contemporaries. The Socratic irony that is evident everywhere in the dialogues is their undoing.

INTRODUCTION

One way to introduce this paper is to relate the response of a colleague who had read the flyer for the lecture where I presented an earlier version of it. It was to the effect that I would no doubt be setting out what philosophy of education has to say about the current state of education, the curriculum and so on: a real opportunity, he said, for impact. The unspoken words 'at last' seemed to hang in the air. I replied by offering him Søren Kierkegaard's famous description of how his life's mission came to him while taking the air in Copenhagen's Fredericksberg Gardens:

> So there I sat and smoked my cigar until I lapsed into thought. …'You are going on', I said to myself, 'to become an old man, without being anything and without really undertaking to do anything. On the other hand, wherever you look about you … you see … the many benefactors of the age who know how to benefit mankind by making life easier and easier, some by railways, others by omnibuses and steamboats, others by the telegraph, others by easily apprehended compendiums and short recitals of everything worth knowing, and finally the true benefactors of the age who make spiritual existence in virtue of thought easier and easier, yet more and more significant. And what

> are you doing?' … then suddenly this thought flashed through my mind: 'You must do something, but inasmuch as with your limited capacities it will be impossible to make anything easier than it has become, you must, with the same humanitarian enthusiasm as the others, undertake to make something harder'. This notion pleased me immensely … I conceived it as my task to create difficulties everywhere (Kierkegaard, 1968, pp. 165–166).

Kierkegaard still has the power to disturb: the obvious objections are perhaps a form of defence. Don't we want travel to be easier and safer? Wouldn't Kierkegaard himself have been grateful for advances in medical science if they alleviated his suffering or saved his life? If we read the excerpt carefully, we notice the depth and subtlety of his challenge, which only makes it more disturbing. The examples go from improvements to travel and telegraphy and on to easy-to-read compendiums and 'short recitals of everything worth knowing': a movement so smooth that it is not easy to see where we have crossed the line between clear benefits and ambivalent ones. Any reader who has nodded along uncritically will surely come to with a jolt when she reaches the idea of making 'spiritual existence in virtue of thought easier and easier', and will wonder whether, if rational thinking is inappropriate in the case of spirituality, it might have limitations elsewhere too.

Kierkegaard brings a caustic irony to bear on several targets here. One is the expectation that the problems of his time simply require more of the same kind of scientific knowledge that introduced omnibuses and telegraphy in the first place. A second target is less the particular kind of knowledge that impresses his fellow-citizens and more the way in which it is held. In 'the many benefactors of the age who know how to benefit mankind' we seem to hear, in the repetition that takes us from *benefactors* to *benefits*, the self-satisfied certainty of the most prominent of these citizens that they are indeed pillars of the community. They are benefactors, and accordingly their propensity to bring benefits cannot be doubted. The further movement from 'know how' to 'everything worth knowing' hints at a deeper complacency. It is not just that the benefactors mistake the kinds of knowledge relevant to different fields of life, as if the same kind is suitable for improving railways and for deepening the spiritual life: knowledge here is held in the wrong way, in the form of knowingness rather than the modest awareness that one can always turn out to be wrong.

In what follows I bring Kierkegaard's critique to bear on various aspects of education in our own time. I identify and challenge the widespread expectation that scientific rationality is the only place to look if we are to find ways of improving education: the fundamentalism that consists in expecting there to be one correct answer that will enable us to dismiss all others, thus condemning us to live in what I have elsewhere (Smith, 2014) called an 'epistemic monoculture'. Furthermore I too have the ambition to resist, to unsettle, 'the requirement of this age that one must bawl systematically and crow world-historically' (Kierkegaard, 1968, p. 163), and not just because like most educationists I have no improvements to railways and

omnibuses to boast about. The invention of the light-sabre and teletransportation, which seems to be the model on which the Impact dimension of the UK's Research Excellence Framework is conceived, continues to elude me. I return to this point below.

At the same time, this article having its origins in a Memorial lecture for that distinguished philosopher of education, Richard Peters, I shall make some remarks about the use of philosophy in our thinking about education: how we are to philosophise, to write philosophy or philosophy of education (in my view nothing interesting hangs on that distinction). Is philosophy destined to lose standing in the academy if it cannot speak in the language of those who can come up with settled systems and eye-catching discoveries, and trumpet their positive impact on the economy? How, in particular, I want to ask, can we do justice to what might be called the quieter side of knowledge, the side that concerns itself with what is unsettled, provisional, uncertain, only partly glimpsed, against the ideal of knowledge that is so well-grounded that it can, so to speak, be fed directly into the production line?

SETTLEMENT

Education in the UK has in the last 30 or so years become thoroughly settled. The 1988 Education Reform Act set out the curriculum of the secondary school in such detail as to homogenise the sector. The effect of this in turn is that better or worse schooling is, for the most part, just simply more or less of the same commodity. Competition between schools on the same, supposedly level playing-field was part of the intention of the National Curriculum from the start. It makes the comparative quality of schools seem entirely transparent and facilitates an educational marketplace where parents can exercise choice among commensurable goods. The narrowing of the curriculum, where art, music and drama have been marginalised, even where they have not disappeared altogether, is simply collateral damage, fed by the suspicion among policy-makers that these are not 'proper subjects' at all.

It is notable how this drive for homogeneity, for settled, uniform and exclusive solutions, increasingly extends all the way down to teaching methods and other aspects of school culture. Teaching children to read supplies a memorable example. In the early years of the primary school phonics—teaching children to link the sounds of words and syllables—has moved from being one of many aspects of the learning of literacy to becoming effectively mandatory. 'Reading by six: How the best schools do it' describes phonics as 'the prime approach to decoding print' (Ofsted, 2010, p. 42), the latter a curious synonym for 'reading' until you realise that 'decoding print' has been chosen for its suggestion of a mechanistic process where phonics would be at home. Phonics is, of course, 'best practice', a phrase that occurs in successive paragraphs, 5 and 6 (p. 5). Talk of 'best practice', a phrase used as if there existed somewhere an exemplar equivalent to the standard meter sealed in the foundation of a building in Paris, also serves to close down criticism and preempt discussion.

It is not my intention to adjudicate in the debate over the merits of phonics.[1] What I want to draw attention to is the way in which synthetic phonics has become for many an article of faith, with the result that scholarly and knowledgeable critics are subjected to abuse and attempts to silence them. Andrew Davis, a prominent critic of phonics, describes some of his own experience of this.[2] He sees the teaching of phonics as verging on a quasi-religious fanaticism whose hallmark, he writes, is 'the belief that your faith is correct, the only one that is correct, and that its truth directly implies the falsity of all other faiths'.

'Settlement', of course, has often been a euphemism for 'destruction': European 'settlers' largely exterminated, sometimes accidentally but often deliberately, the indigenous peoples and cultures they encountered. Higher education in England[3] has not escaped being settled. It now seems to be entirely settled that university education is to be understood purely in terms of a financial transaction: as a matter of fees incurred, fees to be repaid (or in many cases unlikely to be repaid), and lucrative overseas markets to be exploited. The graduate is characterised primarily, or even solely, as the bearer of 'employability skills', which in turn comes down to expected earnings over the graduate's lifetime. The UK's Teaching Excellence Framework (more fully, The Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework) spells out the new order of things: learning is to be understood in terms of 'excellence in teaching', which is largely a matter of how well universities and colleges 'ensure excellent outcomes for their students in terms of graduate-level employment or further study' (Office for Students, n.d.).

The implications of this are extraordinary. If on graduation a student chooses to work for a charity bringing clean water to some of the poorest people in Africa, or to spend a couple of years working for a London church that has a mission to help the homeless, or to join Save the Children as a fund-raiser, or if she decides to retrain as a midwife (all real examples of what some of my recent students are now doing, for no great starting salaries and in two cases virtually none), then according to the UK government they are not enjoying 'excellent outcomes' from their university degrees, and that is my fault—and that of my colleagues—for not teaching them well enough. If on the other hand we encourage our students to go into banking, or to join one of the best-known financial advisory services, where they will be paid well but (if my graduates who took these routes are anything to go by) not be very happy, then our teaching can be judged as excellent. This, then, is the new idea of the university. The point—the meaning—of a university education is only to be expressed in economic terms. Outcome is income (Smith, 2012): the sterility of the equation shows us that something has gone very wrong here. It is the language of an intellectual and cultural wasteland.

It is little comfort to observe that education is not the only field where humane values are being reduced to economic benefits in their crudest forms. I have given examples from sport, remembrance and literature elsewhere (Smith, 2015). There is room here for only two brief, recent examples. The Tour de Yorkshire is a cycle race over several days, in imitation of the

famous Tour de France. It is advertised partly as an opportunity for the people of Britain to see some of the most famous cyclists in the world, and presumably it is hoped that young people will be encouraged to take up cycling for its many health benefits. But Le Tour's web pages emphasise the boost to Yorkshire's economy: by £98 million in 2018.[4] For instance, in the village of Garforth 'businesses reported two weeks' earnings in the space of 24 hours', and in the town of Richmond 'all 12 cash machines ran out of money on the day they hosted the start of stage three [of the race]' (*ibid*.). Similarly the Wigtown Book Festival, in a small town in the west of Scotland, is proud to advertise that in 2019 it generated £4.3 million for the Scottish Economy. In doing so, it 'punched above its weight',[5] which should settle things once and for all.

It is pleasing to note that these developments are becoming regular objects of satire. Jonathan Coe in his novel *Number 11* (Coe, 2015: the title reflects the way that power in the UK has moved from 10 Downing Street, the residence of the Prime Minister, to 11 Downing Street, the residence of the Chancellor of the Exchequer) offers us an 'academic expert' who is a member of the 'Institute for Quality Valuation'. In a television interview she explains that the Institute exists 'to quantify things that have traditionally been thought of as unquantifiable. Feelings, in other words. A sense of awe, a sense of wonder …' (pp. 258–259). She has written a book, *Monetizing Wonder*. Elsewhere in the novel a character is charged with placing a monetary value on the Loch Ness Monster—that is, on the myths and legends that surround this non-existent creature and fuel the profitable tourist industry in the Scottish Highlands. In Hannah Rothschild's 2015 novel *The Improbability of Love*, the Director of the National Gallery can only secure much-needed funding from the government's Department of Culture by mounting initiatives he personally considers meretricious, such as a programme for unmarried mothers who, seeing lots of Madonna and Child paintings, will feel less stigmatised. This can be relied upon to appeal to the Minister for Culture, to whom talk of the intrinsic value of art or museums is meaningless. For him, museums and galleries 'were places to hide from the rain; like big bus shelters' (p. 101).[6]

PHILOSOPHY

In the face of the new economic interpretation of the value of education it is surely time to resurrect the old argument that education is simply worthwhile in itself. Richard Peters devoted Chapter V of *Ethics and Education* to this and returned to it in many other publications. Education, so the argument runs, is an intrinsic good. It is more than just the acquisition of skills and capacities, for these do not involve us sufficiently in getting to grips with principles—that is, in general, with 'the reason why'. Education involves knowledge and understanding in such a way as to bring the learner into the 'inside' of the kind of knowledge involved, and this is transformative for him or her. It is good to be a skilful cook, who earns enough from her work to support herself and her family and whose customers will enjoy their food. The skilful cook has her routines and procedures: the master

chef, on the other hand, grasps the rationale behind them. She understands why aubergines should be salted before frying, just as the good gardener is knowledgeable about the composition of soil and the nurse knows not just that the bed-bound patient needs to be moved often, but also, in some physiological detail, why.

This line of thought, and the style of the examples, are familiar to those who have read the philosophy of education written by Richard Peters and his colleagues, in the 1960s and 1970s especially. Of course they invite the objection: isn't this itself a kind of settlement, a rather complacent, even self-serving doctrine from half a century ago? And hasn't philosophy made a habit of attempting to draw up settlements, particularly concerning education, ever since Plato drew up a blueprint for the ideal city-state in *Republic* (where the discussion of education takes up the whole of Book IV), and founded philosophy much as we know it in the west today?

There is an important distinction to be made between what we might call doctrinal philosophy, which attempts the construction of systems, and what I am here calling 'unsettling' philosophy. (My distinction is similar to the one Richard Rorty makes, between 'systematic' and 'edifying' philosophy: I return to Rorty below.) Plato was for many centuries read as a prominent member of the systematic school, who had political and moral views that, for reasons never clearly explained, he chose to expound in dialogue form, with Socrates as his principal mouthpiece. This way of reading Plato received fresh impetus from Karl Popper's 1945 book, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, according to which the *Republic* sets out a strongly totalitarian ideology. Popper's interpretation proved very influential. Even classical scholars, who generally did not follow Popper's political verdict, tended, like Gregory Vlastos (e.g. 1991, 1994), to regard the Platonic dialogues as steadily less influenced by Socrates and increasingly the expression of Plato's own doctrines. A significant problem with this view however is that there is no clear evidence of the order in which the dialogues were composed, with the result that the move from Socratic dialogue to Platonic doctrine seems sometimes to be taken as reflecting the order of the texts and sometimes as evidence for it.

There is no space here to expand on these theories and the extent to which they have now fallen out of fashion.[7] I only note that at present Plato's works are more and more being read as texts: that is to say they are read with close attention to detail, with an abandoning of the old assumption that some parts of them are philosophical and other parts are not; with a refusal even to categorise them as 'philosophy' at all, as opposed to a kind of rhapsodic writing (Statkiewicz, 2009) that is as close to poetry as it is to what has been thought of as philosophy in recent times. Just as no sophisticated reader of Shakespeare or Alan Bennett imagines that a character in one of his plays voices the playwright's own opinions, equally we should not suppose that any interlocutor in the dialogues—not even Socrates—is a mask for Plato (Press, 2000). In his introduction to his 1997 edition of Plato's *Complete Works*, for example, J.M. Cooper writes firmly that Plato rejects, as Socrates did, the idea of the philosopher 'as a wise man who hands down the truth to other mortals for their grateful acceptance … It is important to realize that

whatever is stated in his works is stated by one or other of his characters, *not* directly by Plato' (p. xix). More recently, Jill Frank (2018) observes that it is very odd to think otherwise when Plato has gone to great lengths to remove himself from the dialogues: 'the Platonic narrator is never Plato' (p. 22). Plato himself never appears in his dialogues. The nearest thing to an appearance is his explicit absence: Phaedo, the narrator of the dialogue that took place during the final day of Socrates' life, gives the names of those who were present with him in his prison cell (*Phaedo*, 59b-c) but says that Plato was not there: he was ill.

From this perspective it is possible to see that, at what has been called the dawn of western philosophy, Plato wrote about the importance less of building systems of knowledge than of unsettling over-confident claims to knowledge: claims that are rash, immature or otherwise ill-founded. The dialogue *Euthyphro*, for example, depicts an encounter between Socrates and a youth so certain of his duties to the gods that he is prosecuting his own father for complicity in the death of a slave on the family's farmland:

> *Socrates*: But tell me, Euthyphro, do you really believe that you understand the ruling of the divine law, and what makes actions pious and impious, so accurately that in the circumstances that you describe you have no misgivings? Aren't you afraid that in taking your father into court you may turn out to be committing an act of impiety yourself?
>
> *Euthyphro*: No, Socrates; I shouldn't be worth much, and Euthyphro would be no better than the common run of men, if I didn't have accurate knowledge about all that sort of thing (Plato, *Euthyphro*, 4–5, 1959).

Euthyphro claims 'accurate' knowledge, as if there could be such a thing in the field of religious or moral duty. The idea of 'exact', 'accurate' or 'precise' knowledge seems more appropriate to mathematics and geometry, and another of Plato's dialogues presents a young man who hopes to acquire knowledge of just this sort. Theaetetus, in the dialogue that bears his name, does not display the cocksureness of Euthyphro, but his study of geometry, in which he is proficient, has led him to think the acquisition of knowledge is generally linear and sequential. His tutor, Theodorus, tells Socrates approvingly that his pupil 'approaches his studies in a smooth, sure, effective way … it reminds one of the quiet flow of a stream of oil. The result is that it is astonishing to see how he gets through his work, at his age' (Plato, *Theaetetus*, 144b, 1992). Theaetetus is in danger of supposing that all learning proceeds like an idealised geometry lesson, from one axiom to another. It is significant that he accepts uncritically Socrates' suggestion, which can only be ironic, that knowledge and wisdom are the same thing (145e) and he readily agrees with each in turn of Socrates' accounts of the nature of knowledge—for instance, that knowledge is perception.[8] He, like Euthyphro and the reader of the dialogues, needs to have his confidence shaken before he can make intellectual progress: and it is this shaking that the dialogue depicts, rather than any positive conclusion about the nature

of 'the right', or of knowledge, that we might have expected the dialogue to lead to. Similarly Phaedrus, in the dialogue named after him, needs to learn that simply sitting at the feet of Socrates by the river Ilissus—and holding with him a conversation that touches on love, the nature of the soul and the priority of speaking over writing (how flattering! For having a conversation is just what Phaedrus and Socrates are doing)—does not make him a philosopher. Even by the very end of the dialogue Phaedrus does not understand this, apparently regarding himself as Socrates' equal. Socrates offers a prayer to Pan and all the other gods of the place where they have been talking. Phaedrus asks him to 'make it a prayer for me too: for what friends have they share' (279c).

If philosophers of education have not always been prominent in embracing the unsettling mission of philosophy, that may be connected with their response to the philosophers who have most exemplified it. There has been very little attention at all paid to Kierkegaard in Anglophone philosophy of education. The 'therapeutic' nature of Wittgenstein's later writings has been thematised, but with an emphasis on the dissolving of philosophical problems, as if this simply offered relief. The tendency of those problems, such as the way we are captivated by the picture of science, to recur and haunt us continually, so that we are unsettled by the cure as much as by the original disease, has been relatively neglected.

The reception of the Platonic dialogues by philosophers of education in particular has until recently focused almost entirely on the *Republic*, presumably because it is there that Plato is thought to discuss the institutional arrangements of education and to present a blueprint for the ideal education in a city-state. It is only relatively recently that the educational significance, in the widest sense, of dialogues such as *Euthyphro*, *Theaetetus*, *Phaedrus* and *Meno*—where we see the character from whom the dialogue takes its name undergoing the challenge to settled thinking that is the precondition of making any real educational progress, for the young men of Athens as for young people today—has begun to be explored.[9] Even when discussing the *Republic*, philosophers of education seldom distinguish Plato from Socrates, or from the 'Socrates' who is the protagonist of the dialogue, and display a deaf ear to the irony of this complex 'framing' of the dialogue (if we can call it a dialogue) that here as elsewhere in Plato's writings seems to preclude any literal, straightforward reading (Smith, 2014). It is even common to find philosophers of education writing about Plato airily without reference at all to any particular text or passage in it, as if the dialogues constituted a consistent whole; Plato is repeatedly said to have held 'doctrines', 'theories', 'principles' or similar.

Richard Peters was a man of his time, so we should be neither surprised nor disappointed that in his 1966 book *Ethics and Education* he wrote that Plato held a 'theory of forms' (pp. 24, 102); that he and Socrates—the two not being in any way distinguished from each other—held a 'doctrine' that 'virtue is knowledge' (p. 31); that Plato, along with Aristotle and Spinoza, held a 'doctrine of function' (p. 153); that Plato's 'system' contains principles of practical reason (p. 209). There are many other remarks of a similar nature, all tending towards a reading according to which, so far from

unsettling our ideas, Plato is concerned to pass onto us a final and authoritative theoretical system rather than to teach us to think for ourselves.

Yet this reading of Plato seems at odds with a fundamental theme of Peters' writings and in particular his view of the nature of philosophy of education. Here are the opening words of *Ethics and Education*: 'There was a time when it was taken for granted that the philosophy of education consisted in the formulation of high-level directives which would guide educational practice and shape the organisation of schools and universities' (p. 15). These words are echoed in Chapter 1: 'It might be thought that the obvious way of beginning a study in the philosophy of education would be to formulate a definition of "education"' (p. 23). Here is the philosopher challenging from the start the expectations of the age, creating difficulties—or, to use the terms of my title, unsettling what is taken for granted, what is thought to be the obvious way forward, which starts with the offer of certainty supplied by a definition and results in having an impact on educational practice in schools and universities.

This tension between what I am here calling 'settled' and 'unsettled' philosophy suggests that we might devote more thought than we often do to what is 'philosophical' in thinking about education and our other public goods and services, as it was until recently natural to call them. If we cannot confidently think of philosophy as one of the foundational disciplines of educational thought—that is, a settled base to build truths upon—as it was conceived for many years in the wake of the work of Richard Peters and his colleagues, just how are we to characterise it? And this is related to another theme, which is never far from the surface of this paper, as it is never far below the surface of Richard Peters' writings: the question of the ends and purposes of education, of just what education is for, a question which, as I shall try to explain in the next section, cannot be separated from the issue of how we are to *go about addressing* the question of the value of education—how we are to write about it and talk about it, what genres or disciplines or styles of thought or text will best serve us here. To puzzle over the nature of philosophy itself is thus no merely introspective exercise, a distraction from important practical issues in education that demand our attention.

CHANGING THE DISCOURSE

The power of satire—particularly its power to expose as ridiculous what has become or is becoming 'the new normal'—may make us wonder whether philosophy is always our best weapon in exposing the follies of our age. Some of philosophy's most famous exponents, fortunately, have been adept at shaking—unsettling—our confidence in philosophy itself as a distinctive form of enquiry: from Plato's use of the dialogue form to disavow any doctrinal intentions to Nietzsche's maxim that 'pleasure in mockery' is a sign of (philosophical) health.[10]

There are prominent modern philosophers too who are happy to unsettle our confidence in philosophy itself as a distinctive form of enquiry. The US philosopher Richard Rorty, for example, takes the view, especially in

Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity (1989), that radical social changes generally take place not because an individual philosopher or thinker, or even a group of them, puts forward an irrefutable argument: it is more that a language which has long seemed to be the only language to use starts to seem old-fashioned or inadequate. He gives the example (p. 12) of how 'the traditional Aristotelian vocabulary got in the way of the mathematical vocabulary that was being developed in the sixteenth century by students of mechanics' and accordingly was eclipsed by it. We should, he writes, think less in terms of arguments, rigour and clarity, which we might take to be the distinctive tools and badges of philosophy, and more in terms of changes in language. When a vocabulary becomes 'entrenched'—when it becomes, as we might put it, little more than rhetoric or jargon—and is experienced as unhelpful, stopping us from saying the things we feel we want to say, conventional philosophical critique is largely ineffectual because it tends to operate with the same central concepts whose limitations it is attempting to expose. A good example (mine, not Rorty's) is the way in which the language of performativity, of efficiency and effectiveness, skills and performance indicators, has a habit of re-emerging in attempts at different discourses about the purpose of education. The way forward, Rorty writes, is

> To redescribe lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a pattern of linguistic behavior which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it, thereby causing them to look for appropriate new forms of nonlinguistic behaviour, for example, the adoption of new scientific equipment or new social institutions. This sort of philosophy does not work piece by piece, analysing concept after concept, or testing thesis after thesis. Rather, it works holistically and pragmatically. It says things like 'try thinking of it this way'—or more specifically, 'try to ignore the apparently futile traditional questions by substituting the following new and possibly interesting questions' (1989, p. 9).

On this view the best way of countering and replacing bad ideas often involves finding a new language or vocabulary, and it is this, rather than logically compelling arguments, that makes cultural change possible. The new language might even involve the recovery of an older language: of Plato, for instance, or John Dewey, or indeed Richard Peters—but now thought of as a language that allows us to say what we want to say rather than one which perfectly mirrors the way the world is.

Stefan Collini makes a very similar point about the justification of the humanities in his book, *What Are Universities For?* (2012). The best way to undertake such justification, he writes, may be simply (and, I take it, repeatedly) to say 'See, this is what we do: terrific, isn't it?' while, as Collini puts it, dumping a 'huge pile of excellent scholarly books on the steps of the relevant ministry'. The fatal move would be to be drawn into speaking the language, no doubt the instrumental language of the bottom line, of 'sober-suited self-styled administrative realists' (p. 84). The proper way to justify

the humanities—and the point can be applied just as well to the justification of education for its own sake—may be, he writes:

> as much a matter of tone and confidence as it is of definitions and arguments … [The humanities] are ways of encountering the record of human activity in its greatest richness and diversity. To attempt to deepen our understanding of this or that aspect of that activity is an intelligible and purposeful expression of disciplined human curiosity and is—insofar as the phrase makes any sense in this context—an end in itself (p. 85).

Collini describes what he calls his 'remarks' as 'deliberately intransigent' and observes that 'very little that is of any interest or significance in our lives is like a crossword puzzle or a chess problem' (*ibid*.). That is to say it is not like a piece of formal logic. The point is a quintessentially Aristotelian one: that precision is to be sought just so far as the nature of the subject admits. 'It is evidently equally foolish to accept probable reasoning from a mathematician and to demand from a rhetorician scientific proofs' (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094b11-27, 1969).

Now it might seem that Rorty and Collini are recommending rhetoric, rather than philosophy; or saying, in Rorty's case, that we shall be better able to say what we want to say—what we want to be heard and understood—if we are less haunted by the idea that there is an unbridgeable gap between philosophy and other modes of discourse. Collini deploys a splendid polemical rhetoric of his own, suggesting that this will prove more effective than philosophy in turning the barbarians back from the gates. But of course there are forms of philosophy which are themselves close to literature and rhetoric and often hard to distinguish from them. The point is not that we need to give up on philosophy altogether.

INTRINSIC VALUE

The questions of just what education is for, and how philosophy, or philosophy of education, can help us make progress in thinking about this, should I think puzzle us—should unsettle us—rather more than they seem to do. Let me start on this line of thought by quoting Richard Peters again. He writes (1966, p. 46) that various views of education have proved inadequate because they overemphasise one or other criterion and underemphasise or omit others.

The traditional view of 'education', for instance, emphasised the matter and cognitive perspective of 'education' rather than its manner; the child-centred view drew attention to questions concerned with its manner and rather evaded the question of its matter; views which build up an account of 'education' by extrapolating what is involved in acquiring skills ignore its cognitive perspective.

We might think of this, I suggest, less as an invitation to rejoin these debates equipped with the traditional and established armoury of philosophy than as an opportunity to rethink what ways of doing philosophy—what ways of writing and thinking—might prove interesting, helpful,

provocative and of course unsettling. Taking Peters' remarks in reverse order, the enthusiasm for workplace and employability skills (with the accompanying assumption that we know what these are, and the even more unlikely assumption that we know what they will be in the future) threatens loss of 'cognitive perspective' in a challenge to traditional subjects and disciplines. It does not take much to imagine or foresee the replacement of subject-based university modules with courses in You and Your CV, and Introduction to Entrepreneurship (which I interpret as combining desperation to hit graduate employment targets with a recognition that traditional graduate jobs are disappearing, not forgetting that state support for self-employment means fewer in the job-seeker's allowance category). This suggests that important work is to be done in articulating the benefits, in more than crude instrumental terms, of many of the subjects traditionally studied in schools and universities. It also points to the need to think more carefully about the intrinsic value of the possession of skills, properly so called, in situating the individual in a healthy relationship with the material world in which she finds herself. What Richard Peters called 'the child-centred view' has come around again: its new guise is 'the teaching of happiness' and concern about young people's mental health. No-one could deny that we want our young people to be happy rather than at or near the bottom of every league-table of happiness in the western world, not forgetting the savings to the National Health Service if there are fewer cases of depression, self-harm and eating disorders to treat. But here naturally we encounter those who claim to know that traditional education is letting our young people down and should be replaced with happiness lessons.

If the problem is that education has become commercialised and instrumentalised, then the research and thinking—the research which consists in thinking, especially—that need to be done here, however, come up sharply against the difficulty of offering a justification of anything 'for its own sake'. As Plato has Socrates observe in the *Republic*, it's no good recommending *dikaiosune*, justice or 'the right', for the sake of its consequences, for this will be to recommend it not for itself but for the sake of something else. So too with education. Any ground on which we justify it risks being other than the thing itself, the Platonic form, so to speak, pure, eternal and uncompromised by extrinsic considerations. Richard Peters and his followers were of course attracted by a 'transcendental' justification of education, along the lines that just as anyone who asks what the value of truth is shows by their very question their commitment to truth (we cannot imagine someone asking 'Tell me why truth is valuable, and you can lie about it if you like'); so too any enquiry into the purposes of education presupposes an acceptance of the kinds of values and ideas without which the enquiry cannot get off the ground. There now seems to be a general agreement that this kind of argument does not do the work required of it (see e.g. Hand, 2009). Assuming that this is so, how then are we to talk, to write, to philosophise about intrinsic goods?

IRONY IN CONCLUSION

As the discussion so far has suggested, the issue of intrinsic value and that of the nature of philosophy are closely connected. On one conception of the nature of philosophy—especially one that prides itself on the rigour of the discipline—philosophy can offer no argument for the intrinsic value of anything, and can say little beyond reminding us that offering reasons for the intrinsic value of, say, education, will always amount to justifying education not in itself but in terms of its consequences. This is partly why, in the *Republic*, Plato has Socrates examine the value of justice by analogy, addressing the issue in the context not of the individual but that of the city-state or *polis*, on the grounds that what emerges 'writ large' in the latter context can then be applied to the individual and how his or her life ought to be lived. We are simply to *see* that the just *polis* is one we would choose to live our life in. In a similar way Collini writes that there is no better way of getting the relevant politicians and administrators to recognise how 'terrific' academics' books and other publications are than by unloading them at their doors for them to read.

Here, then, is a great irony at the heart of philosophy. At the very point where philosophy seems called on to press home arguments for the intrinsic value of goods such as education and of course for philosophy itself, it can offer only analogy, anecdote, myth and legend (as in the *Republic* and elsewhere in Plato's dialogues), metaphor, reflections on language itself, rhetoric and persuasion rather than the quasi-geometric, compelling force of logic. It presents us from time to time with characters in dialogue with one another, texts within texts, masks and pseudonyms (those adopted by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, for instance). Sometimes comedy and drama come close to philosophy, as when 'Socrates' appears in Aristophanes' *Clouds*. It employs unreliable narrators: Plato is often at pains to present his dialogues as related by those whose authority for doing so is undercut in one way or another, and whose memory of them is implausibly prodigious. Serious philosophy can include fairy-story without loss of philosophical power, as the story of Er in the *Republic* shows (Smith, 2014).

Yet this is not to say that there are some areas of discussion where it seems philosophy can 'offer *only* analogy, anecdote, myth and legend' and so on. This could only be said ironically because (to repeat the argument), taken literally, it implies that philosophy is most itself—most true to what philosophy at its best can be—when it supplies more rigorous arguments and justifications: ones of a geometric or mathematical kind, perhaps. The history of European philosophy, from Descartes to the early Wittgenstein, is one of fascination with, not to say bewitchment by, the tropes and forms of mathematic and geometric proofs and demonstrations, and philosophers of education have not been immune to it. It is an indictment of millennia of the study and writing of philosophy in the western tradition that we need to go back to Plato and a handful of other philosophers, largely those whom Richard Rorty calls 'edifying' rather than 'systematic', who have resisted the demand for philosophy to culminate in certainty.[11] That demand, as I indicated near the beginning of this paper, seems bound to be

exacerbated by the current expectation, in the UK and increasingly elsewhere, for philosophers, like other academics, to bawl and crow about the importance of their work as they try to demonstrate its 'impact'. Irony, to state the obvious perhaps, does not fit comfortably with such expectations since the ironist inclines to modesty about her work, acknowledging its unsettling shortcomings and paradoxes. She is out of step with the spirit of the age; but her kind of philosophy, sceptical of certainties and fundamentalisms, and prepared to put itself in question, can help us engage with some of our most difficult challenges: how to think about education, and so how to prepare humankind for the future.[12]

Correspondence: Richard Smith, School of Education, University of Durham, DH1 1TA, UK.
Email: r.d.smith@durham.ac.uk

NOTES

1. There are in fact many objections to the exclusive teaching of phonics of the kind prescribed. For example, it is tested by the child reading a list of isolated words to the teacher, including nonsense words (such as 'strom') which must be sounded out phonetically (apparently some children charitably correct these to words that make sense, such as 'storm', and lose marks in consequence). This is not an approach that teaches a child to read for meaning, let alone pleasure. English moreover is phonetically a highly irregular language: it is usual to cite the phonetic diversity of words ending in –ough, such as 'thorough', 'rough', 'bough' (of a tree), 'cough', 'through', or those ending in –ove ('dove', 'drove', 'move'). Variety of pronunciation around as well as within regions of the UK constitutes a further problem in phonics teaching that is seldom acknowledged.
2. See, for example, an article entitled 'Outstanding Overview Addresses Nonsense in Davis' paper'. Available online at: http://rrf.org.uk/messageforum/viewtopic.php?f=1%26t=5887%26hilit=Davis. Accessed 2 May 2020.
3. Here it is necessary to distinguish England from the other jurisdictions of the UK—Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland—which have not followed the Westminster government in such matters as charging students exorbitantly high tuition fees that in most cases they can only afford by taking out loans, the repayment of which will follow them well into their adult lives.
4. See https://letour.yorkshire.com/the-latest/tour-de-yorkshire-boosts-county-s-economy-by-98-million/. Accessed 3 May 2020.
5. See https://www.thebookseller.com/news/wigtown-book-festival-punches-above-its-weight-generating-43m-scottish-economy-1175226. Accessed 3 May 2020.
6. The satire's targets are real. They emanate from the demand for what is called social return on investment. Morse *et al*., 2015, offer a rich example.
7. For an excellent brief overview, see Press, 2000, pp. 1–6.
8. Blondell, 2002, pp. 260 ff, writes that Theaetetus is a 'paradigm of the promising young philosophical nature' and a kind of second Socrates intellectually. In my view the dialogue shows, rather, how great the gap is between Socrates and even an unusually clever young man.
9. See, e.g., Fendt and Rozema, 1998.
10. 'Objection, evasion, happy distrust, pleasure in mockery are signs of health: everything unconditional belongs in pathology' (Nietzsche, 1990, § 154).
11. Those whom Rorty identifies as 'edifying' philosophers include Kierkegaard, Santayana, William James, Dewey, the later Wittgenstein, and the later Heidegger (1979, p. 367).
12. An early version of this paper was given in Cambridge in May 2014 as part of the R.S. Peters Memorial Lecture Series. I am grateful to the many members of the audience who made helpful comments, and to Paul Standish both for inviting me to give the lecture and for his suggestions for improvements to the text of this paper.

REFERENCES

Aristotle (1969) (trans. D. Ross) (London, Oxford University Press).
Blondell, R. (2002) *The Play of Character in Plato's Dialogues* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).
Coe, J. (2015) *Number 11* (London, Penguin).
Collini, S. (2012) *What Are Universities For?* (London, Penguin).
Cooper, J.M. (ed.) (1997) *Plato. Complete Works* (Indianapolis, IN, Hackett).
Fendt, G. and Rozema, D. (1998) *Platonic Errors. Plato, a Kind of Poet* (Westport, CT, Greenwood Press).
Frank, J. (2018) *Poetic Justice: Rereading Plato's Republic* (Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press).
Hand, M. (2009) On the Worthwhileness of Theoretical Activities. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 43.1, Supplement 1, *Reading R.S. Peters Today*, pp. 109–121.
Kierkegaard, S. (1968) *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. D.F. Swenson (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press).
Morse, N., Thomson, L., Brown, Z. and Chatterjee, H. (2015) Effects of Creative Museum Outreach Sessions on Measure of Confidence, Sociability and Well-Being for Mental Health and Addiction Recovery Service-Users, *Arts & Health* 7.3, pp. 231–246.
Nietzsche, F. (1990) *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London, Penguin).
Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) (2010) Reading by Six: How the Best Schools Do It (London, Department for Education). Available online at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/reading-by-six-how-the-best-schools-do-it. Accessed 15 April 2020.
Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) (2019) Education Inspection Framework (London, Department for Education). Available online at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/education-inspection-framework. Accessed: 5 April 2020.
Office for Students (n.d.)What is the TEF? Available online at: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/teaching/what-is-the-tef/. Accessed: 5 April 2020.
Peters, R.S. (1966) *Ethics and Education* (London, George Allen & Unwin).
Plato (1959) *Euthyphro*, trans. H. Tredennick (London, Penguin).
Plato (2005) *Phaedrus*, trans. C. Rowe (London, Penguin).
Plato (1992) *Theaetetus*, trans. M.J. Levett (Indianapolis, IN, Hackett).
Popper, K. (1945) *The Open Society and its Enemies* (London, Routledge).
Press, G.A. (ed.) (2000) *Who Speaks for Plato? Studies in Platonic Anonymity* (Lanham, MD, Rowman & Littlefield).
Rorty, R. (1979) *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford, Blackwell).
Rorty, R. (1989) *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).
Rothschild, H. (2015) *The Improbability of Love* (London, Bloomsbury).
Smith, R. (2012) University Futures. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 46.4, pp. 649–666.
Smith, R. (2014) Re-reading Plato: The Slow Cure for Knowledge, in: M. Papastephanou, T. Strand, T. and A. Pirrie (eds) *Philosophy as a Lived Experience: Navigating Through Dichotomies of Thought and Action* (Berlin, LIT Verlag), pp. 23–37.
Smith, R. (2015) Educational Research: The Importance of the Humanities. *Educational Theory*, 65.6, pp. 739–754.
Statkiewicz, M. (2009) *Rhapsody of Philosophy* (University Park, PA, The Pennsylvania State University Press).
Vlastos, G. (1991) *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press).
Vlastos, G. (1994) *Socratic Studies* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).